



1930 Ninth Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
406-457-8900  
[publichealth@lccountymt.gov](mailto:publichealth@lccountymt.gov)  
[www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org](http://www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org)

**For IR Public Health Column**

**November 2015**

**Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-457-8910**

**Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908, 406-439-4503 (cell)**

## **Deadly Lung Disease, COPD, Too Common in Our Community**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
County Health Officer**

Four little letters robbed my mother of her “golden years”: COPD. They stand for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and they’re all too familiar to many residents of Lewis and Clark County.

COPD is an umbrella term used to describe a set of lung diseases that includes emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and some asthma. It’s characterized by breathing problems that get progressively worse, and it’s caused by long-term exposure to irritants that damage the lungs and airways. It’s the third leading cause of death in Montana and the nation after cancer and heart disease.

Symptoms of COPD include breathlessness, frequent coughing, wheezing, and tightness in the chest.

### **Causes of COPD**

My mother smoked for 28 years before quitting at the age of 48. She knew it caused her COPD.

In fact, about 90 percent of those who become ill with COPD are current or former smokers. The single best way to prevent the disease is to avoid smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke.

Recent data show a troubling level of COPD in Lewis and Clark County. According to hospital discharge records, residents are more likely to go to the emergency room or be admitted to the hospital for COPD than Montanans in general. (For data junkies, the rate of inpatient admissions for COPD in 2011-2013 was 860 per 100,000 people in the county versus 717 in the state. The rate of emergency room visits was 904 per 100,000 in the county and 805 in the state.)

Yet statistics also show that county residents are no more likely to smoke than state residents in general (19 percent).

So if we’re to reduce the incidence of COPD among us, we need to ask ourselves: Why are we seeing higher levels of this disease in our community? Obviously we need to do all we can to help people quit smoking and discourage others from starting. Are there other factors we need to address?

The most common causes of COPD, other than smoking, are exposure to air pollution and genetic predisposition. So people who have long-term exposure to pollutants in the workplace – chemicals, dust, and fumes, for instance – are at greater risk of getting COPD.

Here in Lewis and Clark County, we're plagued most summers by wildfires that turn our skies dark with smoke. In the winter, temperature inversions often trap pollution from woodstoves and fireplaces in the valley. These certainly aggravate COPD, but there's no clear evidence whether they increase its incidence.

Still, while we can't do much about genes, air pollution is something we can all help to address – through the policies we adopt as a state and community and through the behaviors we engage in personally.

### **Detecting, Managing COPD**

Studies have shown that more than half of adults who have COPD don't know it. Yet testing is simple and painless: it involves blowing as hard as you can into a tube connected to a machine called a spirometer. Ask your doctor for the test if you believe you have symptoms of COPD.

If you're diagnosed with this disease, lifestyle changes and medications can help you feel better, stay more active, and slow its progress. In severe cases, you might need oxygen therapy. There is no cure.

If you have COPD, you're more vulnerable to colds, flu, and pneumonia, and your symptoms are more likely to be severe. My mom had several bouts of pneumonia that kept her from doing the things she loved. So talk to your doctor about getting flu and pneumonia shots.

### **Fighting Back**

Here are some steps we can all take to help protect ourselves and others from COPD:

- If you're a smoker, stop smoking. The Montana Tobacco Quit Line, 1-800-QUIT-NOW, can help by providing counseling and nicotine replacement therapy.
- If you don't smoke, don't start! Smoking causes cancer and heart disease in addition to COPD.
- Avoid exposure to secondhand smoke. Fortunately, the Montana Clean Indoor Air Act, which bans smoking in enclosed public places, helps to protect us.
- Protect yourself from chemicals, dust, smoke, and fumes at home and work. One way to do this is to use less caustic cleaning products, like baking soda and vinegar.
- When smog blankets the valley, keep your windows closed and stay indoors if possible.
- If you use a woodstove or fireplace to heat during the winter, burn as cleanly as possible. That can help protect air quality indoors and out. You can find tips for clean burning on our website at [www.HelenaAir.org](http://www.HelenaAir.org).
- Avoid idling your car or truck any longer than necessary. Turn off the engine while waiting at train crossings.
- Support tobacco- and fragrance-free policies at workplaces and in public buildings and idle-free zones near their entrances.
- Join us public health professionals in the fight for clean air!